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THE ÆSTHETIC IDEAL

SKETCH OF A PHILOSOPHY OF BEAUTY

By FR. ROUSSEL-DESPIERRES

Translated from the French

BOOK I—CHAPTER III—*Continued*

PERHAPS it is among the teachings of Confucius that we may find the model of pure morality most conformant to the feelings of our day. So simple are the precepts of the Chinese philosopher that they preserve all their value for us across the ages and despite the difference of races. To love mankind is the great virtue. Is not that the same which christianism has been preaching in vain to the world for twenty centuries past; and that the most irreconcilable philosophies struggle together to inculcate in man? Confucius conceives of the world as a grand moral system of which good is the principle. Is it not toward a conception of this kind that the most modern philosophy tends? Confucius does not foresee any sanction, human or superhuman, for our meritorious or culpable acts. Is it not by that very sign that we recognize the morality of systems? Confucius is atheistic. Providence itself is abandoned by men who preserve the name of Christians and recognize that at bottom the only way to respect the Divinity is not to pretend to explain it.

In our time there are Stoics just as there are some Epicurians. All the ages have seen some, but the idea of progress which has taken hold of all the intelligences is somewhat hostile to these belated survivals of antique thought, who, regarding the world as evolving eternally, with Herakleitos, expect from this evolution neither more happiness nor a loftier morality. Stoicism is a doctrine of revolt against the exigences of nature and the cruelties of life. Like Buddhism, like christianism, it drags us away from the seductions of earth and forms for us a kind of corselet of insensibility against the blows of fate. And in truth its theory of will is sublime. Will is the only thing that is necessary; in fact, nothing reaches us, neither good nor evil, so long as will remains erect and inflexible; the only evil might be that it should come to weaken. The world is not in the dependence of will; therefore stoicism allows no value whatever to the world. Stoicism has the pride of that sovereignty of will. It knows, it dares to say that it makes man the superior of the gods, for the gods are good by nature and cannot cease from being good; but it is because he wills that man is virtuous. The mind of man does not reach a loftier level.

And no blot corrupts this superb conception. The doctrine of stoicism is empty of hope; pessimist in its principle, it remains irrevocably pessimist. "I alone, and that is enough" says the stoic. He quits life as easily as he enters it; life is nothing but a passage between two nihilities; suicide is the noblest manner of bidding good-bye to this world.

The cold and sad energy of stoicism makes the grandeur of it, but that sorrowfulness and that rigor themselves were the causes of its sterility.

Humanity has never yet seen morality except under the frozen traits of a painful educator. It

would have loved it far more if the latter had borne another face. Whence, then, shall come a smiling and serene philosophy which will make pleasure of a good action and of morality a constant joy of the mind?

Since the last days of paganism the oppression exerted by Christianity has, as it were, choked the conscience of humanity. In order to find again a pure morality in the world, since the disappearance of stoicism it is necessary to cross two thousand years of theological servitude and intellectual darkness. The philosophy of Kant, the inner wish of which is to create an absolute morality superior by this to all the doctrines, and definitive, is certainly one of the most glorious efforts of the human mind, and though, even in Germany, there probably remains not one single pure Kantian, it has imposed on thought at least certain conditions that admit of no appeal.

Has Kant truly formulated a pure morality? If pure morality proceeds neither from a metaphysical principle, nor from observation of human nature, nor from subjection to an end imposed by beliefs or by nature, certainly Kant's morality regarded under its first aspect is a pure morality. Far from basing itself on metaphysics, it is this which gives its own metaphysics; it is this again determines the end of man and this end is no other than morality. As to psychology, listen to Kant: "Pure morality applied to man does not borrow the slightest thing from the knowledge of man himself, but it gives him laws *a priori*, as to a reasonable being."

Man is free—at least *noumenal* man is, for in this world of phenomena his acts are ruled, as everything else, by an absolute determinism—from that liberty flows the autonomy of moral activity. One thing only is important (and that suffices) the good will! This good will is directed by two capital maxims: "Act in such a way that you always treat the reasonable will, that is to say humanity, in yourself and in others as an end and not as a means." There the ideal is proposed. "Act in such a way that the reason for your action can be erected into a universal law for every reasonable and free will." Such is the criterion of our actions.

Duty confronts conscience with an absolute evidence and this evidence imposes itself on practical conduct; that is the *categorical imperative* which is at once the light and the principle of moral obligation. Thus morality, freedom and reason are at bottom one and the same thing.

Magnificent doctrine, which has caused in many a brain the vertigo of sublimity! marvelous conception, bold as it is in the hypothesis! One would wish to admire it without reserve, not notice the hollow spots, close the ears against criticism, not know how greatly Kant himself has diminished and corrupted it.

That noumenal liberty, like the *noumen* itself,

should be a pure hypothesis, this need not be urged as a blame against a theory, the principle of which is, that it borrows nothing either from a doctrine or from any science whatever. But it is singularly to reduce the autonomy of will under the constraint of the categorical imperative, to enclose it within the bounds of a universal law of consciences! Does not the perfect morality demand exactly an unlimited field for action? Is the will that accomplishes the loftiest acts (such as the sacrifice of existence in those cases where that sacrifice is not a duty) susceptible of being erected into a universal law? On the other hand what is the worth of a liberty without initiative? "Morality of slaves!" says Schopenhauer—and that criticism has nothing unjust in it, except its brutality.

Besides, what is this liberty of the intangible *noumen*, which, escaping from contingencies amongst which we believe we are battling, has nevertheless predestined us once and for all to good or evil? Does it direct itself without motives? Are there good and evil *noumens*? He is a partisan of the noumenal existence, this same Schopenhauer, who has declared every hope of ameliorating mankind a chimera!

Kant has denied having demanded anything of nature. But is then that categorical imperative which he affirms as *a priori* concept, this inward and always wakeful feeling of duty, anything else but a psychic fact? If it were not that, it would be a pure illusion, and—here contradictions begin—Kant does not wish that morality should be an illusion. At first he had disengaged morality from the idea of happiness, but through the stress of justice he brings it back again. "That a being should have need of happiness and that he should be worthy of it, without, however, participating in it, that is something we can regard as conforming to the perfect will of a reasonable all-powerful Being, whenever we try to conceive of such a being." And upon the necessity of happiness (here appears the sanction and morality disappears) Kant proceeds to base metaphysics. "So happiness and virtue constitute together the possession of sovereign good." That possession is not to be realized here below; so justice demands that there shall be a reparative life beyond the life on earth, and from that arises for Kant the certainty of the immortality of the soul and that of the existence of God which is therein implied. "Do that which may render you worthy of happiness" says he. That is no longer a disinterested maxim. "Every one" he says again "regards the moral laws as commandments, which they could not be, if they did not attach *a priori* certain sequels to their rules and if in consequence they did not include promises and threats." All Christianity lies there. Like Spencer, so is Kant—a great victim of the Christian tradition. He will proceed to the avowal that the moral law and liberty would be mere chimeras, if the soul were not immortal and if God did not exist.

Besides, there lies the irremediable flaw of the system; it is morality that proves God, and if God does not exist, morality is illusory. What is it then that proves the reality of morality? The liberty of the *noumen*. But what is it that proves the existence of the *noumen* and its liberty? It can be nothing else than the moral certainty. Dominated by the spiritualistic idea of justice, so alien at bottom to

morality, Kant, in order to save it, shuts himself up in a vicious circle without an escape.¹⁸

Still, the capital error of the attempt of Kant does not, in our eyes, consist in that *petitio principii*; certainly it is disconcerting that he should draw a metaphysical certitude from morality in order to give thereafter morality itself to it as sole guarantee; but the reproach of greater moment which I bring against Kant is to have compromised an admirable conception of moral will by trying to give it an impossible foundation.

Kant has left us a great example of the impotence of reason to erect certitudes. All his critique tends to sap the foundation of his morality and one may say that in that respect it has made a sovereign, definitive work. His system ought to have been the categorical affirmation of an independent moral will, or else—and this surely was not an impossible task—he ought to have found natural roots for the categorical imperative in the subjective study of the human soul.

Is it permitted to add a final criticism in face of the sorrowful check of a magnificent attempt? Because a philosophy so lofty could not be accessible to the crowd, there was no reason to condemn it. But the doctrine of Kant is all in all only a doctrine of respect; now, however lofty the idea of the right of consciences may be, it is sterile. Guyau has very justly observed that respect is merely the beginning of the moral idea. Respect is the timidity of will, the servility of the conscience. The fruitful belief is that one which expresses itself by a passionate activity. The soul has need to expand. What is "right," what is "duty" alongside of love?¹⁹

Two of Kant's disciples, Fichte in Germany and Mr. Renouvier in France have carried his doctrine to the height of the sublime. Fichte is little interested in reality. One thing only is important: that which ought to be, that is to say the good, that is

Note 18.—Morality is in no way bound to justice. However iniquitous destiny may appear, however unjust may the consequences of our acts reveal themselves, regarded as sanctions, the moral ideal does not cease one instant to impose itself upon the conscience. Morality and the justice of things are like two solar systems gravitating at so great a distance one from the other than their common attraction can hardly be calculated save by way of the ideal zero.

Note 19.—Kant's morality tends toward happiness, since, according to it, if the good were not happy, there would be no justice, and if justice did not exist, there would be no God. It makes God the guaranty of happiness. Still, one might more correctly ally it to the pessimistic solutions than to the optimistic conceptions of existence, first, because by attaching all moral conduct to the prescriptions of the categorical imperative, it establishes a rule of servitude; then, because sanction, which it could not do without, is a principle of servitude like obligation: because this doctrine brings itself back to christianism, which is essentially pessimistic; because, being Christian, it is spiritualistic, and because spiritualism, condemning the terrestrial life in order to adjourn the true life, is the finished form of moral pessimism.

Thus Christian, the Kantian morality is no longer a model of pure morality. Why, then, have I attached it to the systems of pure morality? Because it affirmed itself at first, and might have remained, free from any religious attachment, free from the rule of constraint, from the promises and menaces of spiritualism; because, moreover, if Kant, in order to give himself more power, has in a way made a vacancy about it by his criticism of knowledge, it might still have subsisted in the face of science. We have a right to forget how greatly Kant has diminished, abased, prostrated it; and then it remains a type of pure morality almost incomparable in beauty. And that is why it was the place to speak of it here and to evoke its fallen glory.

to say the Ideal. The Ideal realizes itself without ceasing; liberty is an Ideal; it ought to be; therefore it exists. Morality, which is the ideal good, ought to be; therefore it is our end: "Man in his entirety is the vehicle of the moral law" says Fichte—"If I can, if I ought to occupy myself with myself, then it is in my quality of instrument of the moral law and in that degree only." Thus morality is the final goal of the individual. "It is only for that, he is; and if this goal ought not to be attained, then he has absolutely no need to exist."

Thus the moral ideal dominates, in a way annihilates reality. Fichte deduces this from metaphysics: "God is the supreme Ideal that ought to be, and if He is already real, it is because nothing is more real than the Ideal."

Thus the system of Fichte is the very type of an absolute morality. With the materialist Feuerbach one may rank him even higher than the Kantian theory, without which, besides, he probably would not have existed. But he foils really too much our intimate need of seeing clearly, of objectiving, of materializing, if you will, the body of our beliefs. This duty, which all in all is an infinite becoming without fixed form, never does realize itself, since as fast as reality takes on body, just so fast it strips itself in order to frame a new ideal, eternally mobile and flying.

Pure morality is not an impracticable morality, so far as definition goes. Its first condition is to be intelligible; the moral life cannot lose itself in subtle and learned arguments; it is a life of feeling. It contents itself with very simple ideas, but it cannot do without charity. Pure feeling does not exist; it is only born in order to attach itself to an object which, whether being or idea, has taken on a sensible form in thought. Abstraction is truly the enemy of morality, which is all action and ought to have the smiling seduction of love.

Mr. Renouvier also seems to disdain the smile and grace of virtue. Still, his conception of morality is very lofty, very pure and much more intelligible than that of Fichte. Like Fichte—and though he has known how to disengage himself from scholastic chimeras—Mr. Renouvier owes much to Kant; in the same way that the Master ended up in theology, he deduces from pure morality a religious metaphysic, and adheres to protestantism. The religious idea is essentially contradictory to that of pure morality, and truly great is the disaster of that fall of an admirable will, even down to dogma.

In fact Mr. Renouvier gave this double principle to morality: man is dowered with reason and believes himself free. The illusion of liberty suffices in his eyes to create duty: "The postulate of liberty as real" he says "is not demanded for the existence of morality." That is indeed a grand affirmation which the determinist philosophy might seize on: illusion is the true measure of things, of right as of duty, of practical conduct as well as the Ideal. I also prefer, I avow, to the categorical imperative of the Master that human reason which in the doctrine of Mr. Renouvier becomes the principle itself of moral obligation. The parallelism of intelligence and duty, by grace of which, I imagine, duty grows greater as intelligence increases, is a proud conception and assuredly one of the noblest which moral philosophy has formulated.

Has not Mr. Renouvier felt, then, the beauty of his system? Has he not comprehended the force of it? Why has he discrowned and subjected it to the yoke of Christian metaphysic?

Like the religions, the spiritualistic theories propose a pessimistic morality, base themselves on the evil and injustice of the terrestrial life, aspire to reparative eternity. They take from action all its merit by the moral obligation; they corrupt the will by the sanction of recompenses; they cause an immense terror to throw its weight upon the soul through the fright of infinite pains; and the ideal which we are seeking has nothing in common with a régime of this kind.

Must one say, besides, that neither Kant nor his predecessors nor his successors have demonstrated the moral certitude? It is enough to the legitimization of a system that it should admit merely a disinterested morality like the doctrine of Confucius for example. But is a perfect morality sufficient for the fecundating of the Ideal?

It would be nothing to have proved the certitude of morality; everything lies in making people love the good. An intellectual morality which does not translate itself in acts is scarcely sincere. The feelings alone lead to action. Pure morality does not elevate itself above the sterile domain of theories, except when it inspires an enthusiastic activity. The grandeur of a doctrine like that of Kant or Mr. Renouvier is the pledge itself of its fruitfulness. Sublimity creates enthusiasm, summons love. The fieriness of morality which it awakens—that is the criterion by which one may judge the value of a system! Passion is a much superior proof than is success itself. Who knows if passion itself is not the veritable goal and real triumph of preachment, and if, to love morality and aspire to perfection is not to have attained morality?

With Kant and his disciples, pure morality is a speculation of the mind. We would like to give it feeling for a principle. What is the Ideal? The distant form of any dream. The moral world which I imagine is that which I love; how could I not wish to realize that which I dream? How could my will resist the longing of my heart when my reason itself, feeling its own impotence, approves and encourages it? The principle of the moral life is desire. Will has no need of proofs. It is a fact. The social value of this fact has for its measure the loftiness of the will. In order to justify a moral ideal it is enough that it be the loftiest creation of the soul which has conceived it. That which gives life to a system is its practical value and the latter depends on the conception, since it forms the measure of the enthusiasm inspired in the moral agent. The certitude of a doctrine is the power of realization which it has and which determines it. To love, to will—is it not to create?

But it is evident that system derived from feeling does not impose itself on the generality of beings, as it appears that a doctrine of reason does. Reason, in appearance at least, formulates universal conclusions. There seems to exist but one rational and certain system, and this system, once discovered, becomes definitive and obligatory for all. On the contrary, feeling, desire, the faculty of enthusiasm, are phenomena of the individual order. Pure morality conceived by desire is definitively a personal will, and the moral value of the agent increases with

the intensity of that will and the loftiness of the Ideal.

I have already refuted this objection: Will might be evil; there are beings who love evil; a moral law is necessary. This hypothesis contradicts the definitions themselves. In fact what is moral will, unless the will to the greatest good? Every being has intuition of good. Morality is the realization of that intuition. The moral is the formula. Where there is no will to good there is no question of moral. It would be singularly to dishonor the word to suppose that a bad will could erect itself into a doctrine of pure morality. On the other hand society is not indifferent to the formation of characters and individual doctrines. There are means for the amelioration of wicked souls. Every being has a vision of good, through this alone, that every one of his resolutions has a possibility of choice for an antecedent. It is the affair of the moral education to fortify that vision to the point of evidence, to cultivate the joy of good actions. If the opinions of an adult man are free, it is necessary on the contrary that education should base itself upon a positive morality.

What shall that morality be? For me the conception of Confucius which assigns the constant perfecting of oneself to the will as the ideal is an admirable conception and perhaps the most fruitful of all those I have reviewed in these pages, because it implies a task and indefinite effort, and because it borrows an ever-reborn force from the inexhaustible contentment when counting the stages in the endless ascent of the being toward the Ideal.

But in vain do I seek in that doctrine the portion of dream and imagination, the psychic spring which will cause a holy enthusiasm to appear, generator of energies and growing wills! As to the spring, I do not perceive it elsewhere than in that universal sentiment which is the æsthetic feeling.

Is it the effect of a personal need to make the Ideal objective under a concrete appearance? Moral perfection, to my mind, is accomplished in beauty;

æsthetic morality is at once the most human and the most ideal of the pure moralities. We shall propose for the theme of practical life the will to realize in oneself the highest imaginable beauty. Perfectionment—if I am permitted the word—is the embellishment of this interior home, this hearth of the intimate life, where holy actions are thought out and from which radiate toward external life the fruitful splendors of a great and beautiful soul.

A doctrine of enthusiasm, believe me!—for where is there to be found a more generous source of lofty inspirations than in the infinite treasure of conceivable beauty? Is not beauty the eternal awakener of love? Principle of action without a peer, I say; for the feeling and pleasure of the beautiful, the æsthetic creation, are entirely personal faculties. They create truly the individual because they differentiate him, and by taking man in a way by the deepest roots of feeling and will, they determine in him a decisive development of the moral activity.

If the merit of religion were to demand a great deal from the human soul, the æsthetic ideal is not inferior to them even from that point of view, since it proposes an infinite moral activity; but it has an incomparable advantage over the religious and the greater number of philosophical doctrines; one and the other, crushed as it were the conscience down upon the spectacle of the misery of mankind and thus paralyzed the moral life (alas, it is the fatality of our nature that suffering revolts it!) This on the contrary, in the good to realize, shows us happiness to attain, the joy to create. Now, if joy is the great hearth of the energies that aid us in triumphing over physical evil, it is also that of fruitful moral will. Thus the æsthetic ideal, ideal of pure morality, optimistic among all the moral conceptions, moral among all the optimistic systems, prepares in joy, beauty and love the reign of absolute Good. It is the radiant symbol of the endless aspirations of humanity.

To be continued.

